

## The Gift by Gail Loon Lustig



Yeziel is eighty-one years old. I know that because when Ma'ayan, a nine-year old boy who visits us in the garden every Tuesday, asked him how old he is, he replied with; 'how much is nine times nine?'. Ma'ayan will probably never forget the answer.

I saw Yeziel for the first time one hot summer's afternoon in our communal garden. He was holding a small pot with a plant inside.

'This is a gift for the garden,' he told Ronit who left go of the dog's leash she was holding, to extend her hand to Yeziel. 'I was given it as a gift myself. It's an Afghanistan berry. It grows into a tall tree with the most delicious berries imaginable. They're about 5 cms long and are really sweet. I love them.'

'So, let's keep it in a safe place behind the compost bin and we'll make sure to water it,' said Ronit. Yeziel smiled and left the garden waving to Ma'ayan as he went.

My turn to feed the fish in the pond is on Saturdays. The walk from our apartment building to the Garden is pleasant; we are separated by a grass patch that is greener than most.

One morning I noticed a man with thin grey hair limping ahead of me. He was slight in build, and wore a button up cotton pink shirt. His knee was covered with an elastic bandage and he wore open shoes without socks. As I hastened to catch up with him, I recognized Yeziel.

'Ah it is you!

'Yes, I've come to check on my plant I left here some weeks ago'.

I remembered where Ronit had put it behind the compost bin.

I found it looking lifeless with dry soil and a few dead leaves. It had been a hot summer and there was no way it could have survived without water.

'I'm really sorry about this, I said. It seems we forgot to water the plant'.

'Yes, what a shame', he said sitting down on a brown stained chair under the pomelo tree.

There was something about him that was endearing. A gentle soul, warm eyes and soft voice.

I poured us both some cold water in coloured plastic cups.

Are you from South Africa?, asked Yeziel recognizing my accent.

'Yes', I said.

'Well then, we have the same roots. Lithuanian. My parents came to Palestine from Lithuania. I was a young boy. After a brief period in Tel Aviv, I was sent to Kibbutz Sarid in the Jezriel Valley, in the 'Child from Outside program'. Kibbutzim would receive children

from the cities in Israel and introduce them into the way of life there. That's where I learnt to love agriculture. We'd work in the fields or cowshed mostly in the afternoon, after school.

I suppose this is why I love this garden, but now that I am so ill, I can't work anymore. In fact, it's hard for me to do almost everything. Simple things like getting around, bending down, I have trouble with'.

'Well, it's wonderful you brought us this plant. I had never heard of an Afghanistan Berry until now', I said.

The music from the school-hall nearby drifted over to where we were sitting.

'My wife loves dancing with her group in the hall. She comes here every Saturday. Now here's my plan. I'll buy a plant from the nursery not far from here and bring it to you in the next few weeks.'

We said our good-byes after he learnt how I had landed up in the Garden, where I lived, and what my children were up to.

And it took a good few Saturdays for him to keep his word, but one day he arrived with a plant about his height, large green leaves and a healthy stem.

'This is for the garden', he said.

'I don't believe I'll enjoy the fruit, but I'm happy knowing it will find a home here. Ma'ayan will love them. In about two years' time, the tree should bear fruit.'

The following Tuesday, we planted the berry tree in the top half of the garden where it has ample space to put down roots. After a few weeks, Yechiel came to visit.



His smile when he saw the tree, erect and with many more leaves showed how happy he could be.

"It's made my week!", he said.

"Mine too! I promise to look after it and can't wait for the berries all the way from Afghanistan"..

And yes, I do look after it. Each and every Tuesday, I notice how well it's doing and as I touch the oversized healthy green leaves, I somehow sense the joy that is embedded within them. A tree with a unique provenance. A love story of a different sort.

**The Gift by Gail Loon Lustig**

**Written in July 2022, Posted on the CHOL , Share Your Story Site, Jan 2023**